

Arthur J. Pulos, *American Design Ethic: A History of Industrial Design*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London, The MIT Press, 1983. IX + 441 pp., 350 illus., \$50.00 (cloth)

David Feist

Volume 12, Number 1, 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073703ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073703ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Feist, D. (1985). Review of [Arthur J. Pulos, *American Design Ethic: A History of Industrial Design*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London, The MIT Press, 1983. IX + 441 pp., 350 illus., \$50.00 (cloth)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 12(1), 85–86. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073703ar>

ARTHUR J. PULOS *American Design Ethic: A History of Industrial Design*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London, The MIT Press, 1983. ix + 441 pp., 350 illus., \$50.00 (cloth).

In his preface, using the rather ponderous language which prevails throughout the beginning chapters, Mr. Pulos writes: 'History will prove that if a humane democracy is to be this country's legacy to mankind, its unique contribution to world culture may well be the democracy of its manufactured products.' While this statement is not disputed, it could have been exemplified by this handsome book. But, regrettably, its high price makes it quite undemocratic as a textbook. I hope a less selfconsciously designed paperback edition will become available. Particularly in a book on design, the designer's ego should play second fiddle to content and economy of means.

The title of the book *American Design Ethic* is likely to use the word 'Ethic' in an unfamiliar sense. The designer has always and everywhere been in an ethical dilemma: if he is a professional who combines inventiveness, knowledge of materials and technologies with aesthetic judgement and social conscience, he cannot easily accept the notion of design solely as a means of achieving greater commercial success either for a manufacturer or for himself, without being sure of the real benefit to the consumer or to society. This moral conflict existed and still exists among designers – not only in America, but everywhere.

I quote two examples for this, from outside the USA. At a meeting of the German 'Werkbund' in 1919, its president, the architect Hans Poelzig, said: 'Commerce and industry have usually prostituted the artist. In their interest is too much the trend toward the fashionable, toward the ever New, which does not mean new creation, but means emphasis on a striking feature which induces the public to purchase. Commerce is not interested in creating what remains valid, not even in what is solid and lasting. It is not a question of supply and demand, but if the designer can create an *artificial* demand.' It was in those same years that the English sculptor and designer Eric Gill complained: 'So we have the designer who de-

signs what he never makes and the worker who minds the machine which makes what he never designs. And we have the salesman who neither designs things, nor minds machines, but who is to know what the public wants. But the public doesn't know what it wants and so people are dependant upon the salesman and the salesman is only concerned with what will sell. Saleability is his only criterion.'

Mr. Pulos quotes a pronouncement of the American Watch Company which, in 1850, has produced the 'dollar' pocket watch, one of the early triumphs of machine production, perhaps the essence of ideal American design ethics: 'The product must at the onset be conceived to be better than its competition in order to gain and hold immediate market acceptance. It must be designed especially for mass-production processes rather than hand manufacture.'

This quotation reveals one of the many facets of American design history which the author has brought together. It states perfectly ethical principles which include, by implication, the designer and the consumer. The following chapters of the book name some American designers who have lived by these principles. A famous example is that of Henry Dreyfuss who turned down a generous offer from the Bell Telephone Company to design, in competition with ten of his peers, the 'table phone of the future'; he was not permitted to work with Bell engineers to design the instrument 'from the inside out,' i.e. functionally. When the ten designs submitted proved useless, Dreyfuss was commissioned to do it his way and designed the first dial phone and many other Bell products in the following years.

However, other American designers did not live by such high ethical principles and allowed their profession to deteriorate into crass commercialism: commercial success as entrepreneurs in design with gains for their clients was their sole aim. This has happened similarly in other fields of endeavour and in other countries. My conclusion would be that there is really no such thing as an 'American Design Ethic' – what Mr. Pulos never says in so many words. There have always been designers with varying moral principles: ethics carry no flag.

With the emergence of consumerism many industries and their designers are reminded that commercial success could depend on ethics of design. It is a pity that the book takes note of this development only in its epilogue, an epilogue which occurs following the author's discussion of the year 1940, when industrial design was getting into its 20th-century stride. The dust jacket carries the subtitle 'A History of Industrial Design'; however, '... to 1940' would have been an important addition. But to do justice to Mr. Pulos' great diligence, *American Design Ethic* is a useful work containing a wealth of relevant socio-economic and industrial episodes. It is, indeed, a history of industrial design because the development of American industrial design has been inextricably involved with design developments in Europe and with leading European designers.

The author's main interest is directed towards the uniquely American contributions of mass production methods and of the numerous American inventions which led to the democratization of American society and ultimately benefitted the rest of the world. Among those, he discusses the development of the sewing machine, the vacuum cleaner and the electric iron – to name only some of a host of electrified gadgets – and credits them with having helped to liberate women from home and kitchen drudgery. Many of the achievements of American inventiveness and technological know-how were not matched until after World War II. Their success furthered by American methods of promotion and advertising had already made the United States rich and powerful long before that and long before such publicity techniques were accepted and used in Europe.

Pulos puts great emphasis on the promotional impact of exhibitions: the Centennial Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia which showed Michael Thonet's bentwood furniture and plenty of 'vulgar' Victorian splendour, as well as 'the largest steam engine ever built'; the Paris World Exposition of 1925, in which the United States declined to participate because President Hoover did not feel they could compete adequately with European taste; and the influential show of 'Machine Art' at the young Museum of Modern Art

in 1934 where Alfred H. Barr Jr. was director and Philip C. Johnson, director of the Department of Architecture.

In its last two sections the book deals principally with the work of individual American practitioners of design. Some of them, like Walter Dorwin Teague, Henry Dreyfuss or Norman Bel Geddes have to be regarded as part of international industrial design history, while others should be remembered as inventors of obsolescence and of the functionally unjustified but commercially profitable 'facclift'.

Mr. Pulos reacts with fairly bad grace to the influence of the Bauhaus and Bauhaus-connected immigrants, making an exception for its art-educational innovations. One is reminded of Tom Wolf's rantings against Gropius, et al. In fact, through its publications and various exhibitions, the Bauhaus had established its influence on American designers years before the famous Bauhaus personalities – Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Marcel Breuer, Herbert Bayer, Joseph Albers, Hin Bredendieck – arrived on American shores.

By and large, the book covers the same territory as that available in the Englishman John Heskest's *Industrial Design*, published in 1980, which is much less bipartisan and in sum teaches the same lesson, alas, at a cheaper price. Considering the constant interchange of ideas between Europe and the USA, Heskest offers a more balanced overview; inclusion of his book in Pulos' 220-item bibliography might have served a useful purpose.

DAVID FEIST
Montreal

LIVRES REÇUS/ BOOKS RECEIVED

BARRETT, ANTHONY A. and RHODRI WINDSOR LISCOMBE *Francis Rattenbury and British Columbia: Architecture and Challenge in the Imperial Age*. Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1983. XII + 391 pp., 227 illus., \$29.95 (cloth).

BLOMBERG, MARY *Observations on the Dodwell Painter*. Stockholm, The Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities, Medelhavsmuseet, 1983 (Memoir 4). 96 pp., 50 illus.

BRYSON, NORMAN *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984 (Cambridge Studies in French). XXII + 228 pp., 122 illus., \$55.00 (cloth).

BUCHLOH, BENJAMIN H.D. et al. (eds.) *Modernism and Modernity*. Halifax, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983 (The Vancouver Conference Papers). xv + 280 pp., illus.

COLE, BRUCE *The Renaissance Artist at Work: From Pisano to Titian*. New York, Harper & Row, 1983. VIII + 216 pp., 110 illus., \$28.95 (cloth).

CONRAD, PETER *The Art of the City: Views and Versions of New York*. New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984. 329 pp., illus., \$26.75 (cloth).

COOPER, DOUGLAS and GARY TINTEROW *The Essential Cubism: Braque, Picasso and Their Friends, 1907-1920*. New York, George Braziller, Inc., and London, The Tate Gallery, 1983. 448 pp., 233 illus.

CURTIS, PHILLIP H. et al. *Pennsylvania German Art: 1683-1850*. Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1984 (The Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum). XI + 365 pp., 5 microfiches with 363 colour illus., \$126.00 (cloth).

DONNELL-KOTROZO, CAROL *Critical Essays on Post-Impressionism*. Philadelphia, The Art Alliance Press, 1983. 137 pp., 45 illus., 6 colour pl., \$45.50 (cloth).

FREEDBERG, DAVID *The Life of Christ after the Passion, Part VII of Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard – XXVI Parts*. London, Harvey Miller Publishers, and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984. 425 pp., 175 illus., \$103.75.

GRABAR, OLEG *The Illustrations of the Magamat*. Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1984. x + 196 pp., 9 microfiches with 723 illus., \$56.00 (cloth).

HOLLY, MICHAEL ANN *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1984. 268 pp., \$34.95 (cloth).

JOHNS, ELIZABETH *Thomas Eakins: The Heroism of Modern Life*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983. XX + 208 pp., 124 illus. (cloth).

KOLFUN, LILLY *Private Realms of Light: Amateur Photography in Canada, 1839-1940*. Markham (Ont.), Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1984. XVI + 334 pp., illus., \$50.00 (cloth).

KNOX, GEORGE *Piazzetta. A Tercentenary Exhibition of Drawings, Prints and Books*. Washington, National Gallery of Art and Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984. 258 pp., illus., \$69.00 (cloth).

LAMBLIN, BERNARD *Peinture et Temps*. Paris, Klincksieck, 1983. XIV + 654 p., 120 illus. (broché).

LEVIN, MICHAEL D. *The Modern Museum: Temple or Showroom*. Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, Dvir Publishing House, 1983. 206 pp., 207 illus. (cloth).

LONGWORTH, IAN H. *Collared Urns of the Bronze Age in Great Britain and Ireland*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984. XIV + 338 pp., 53 fig., 246 pl., \$245.00 (cloth).

METZ, CHRISTIAN *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, t. I et II. Paris, Klincksieck, 1983 (1968). 244 et 220 p. (brochés).

PODRO, MICHAEL *The Critical Historians of Art*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1984 (1982). XXVI + 257 pp., 75 illus., \$13.95 (paper).

ROSE, MARGARET A. *Marx's Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984. x + 216 pp., 71 illus., \$55.50 (cloth).

ROSENBLUM, ROBERT and H.W. JANSON *19th-Century Art*. New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1984. 527 pp., 413 illus., 89 pl., \$59.00 (cloth).

SHIFF, RICHARD *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study in the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1984. XVIII + 318 pp., 57 illus., \$41.95 (cloth).

SHIKES, RALPH E. and STEVEN HELLER *The Art of Satire: Painters as Caricaturists and Cartoonists from Delacroix to Picasso*. New York, Pratt Graphics Center and Horizon Press, 1984. 125 pp., illus., \$15.50 (paper).

WATSON, JENNIFER *Carl Ahrens as Printmaker: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Kitchener, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, 1984. 44 pp., illus.